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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies and discusses the factors to be considered in selecting the words for beginning reading instruction. Vocabularies for beginning reading are based on the child's oral language, the child's interests, sound-letter regularity, and common words as found in written literature. In addition, there must be a balance among the various classes of words introduced to the beginning reader. Words introduced to children in the initial stages are primarily determined by the oral language and interests of children. Approaches which direct primary attention to the language and those which direct primary attention to the child are discussed. (Author/RB)

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APPROACHES TO THE INTRODUCTION OF WORDS

OR

DECIDING WHICH WORDS TO TEACH FIRST IN BEGINNING READING INSTRUCTION

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APPROACHES TO THE INTRODUCTION OF WORDS

or

DECIDING WHICH WORDS TO TEACH FIRST IN BEGINNING READING INSTRUCTION

Sometime around the child's sixth birthday he is introduced to the first word which he will be expected to learn or to remember as being one single word separate and different from other words. Although some children will have learned some words before they enter school and will know how to read to some degree, most will not. And although it is true that some children will have learned some words in kindergarten, most will not have learned any. So the topic of this paper is one of concern primarily to first-grade teachers or those who prepare materials for first-grade instruction since most children learn to read their first words in the first grade.

In this paper, approaches to the introduction of words shall refer to the various means by which one chooses the words to teach first. The information presented here is intended to help answer the following questions:

1. How does one decide which words to introduce first in beginning reading instruction?
2. Which one or two hundred words from that body of over six hundred thousand words in our English language should the child learn to read first?

Approaches which direct primary attention to the language and those which direct primary attention to the child will be discussed.

Most Commonly Used Letter in Written English

The single letter which occurs more often than any other letter in written English is the letter e (1). And in most cases it represents the vowel sound we hear in pet or leg or elf. One may make a case that because this e--the short e sound--is so common, it must be introduced very early in the reading program, perhaps first. Early sentences might be: Get wet pet or Ten eggs were empty or Extra elephants enter early.

There may be more important concerns.

The Letter Most Commonly Used at the Beginning of Words

Since a number of reading authorities have stated that the best single cue in the decoding process is the first letter of the word, perhaps the first words ought to begin with the letter which is most commonly found in the initial position of a word; that letter is s. More words begin with s than with any other letter. The letter t runs a very close second (2). Should your first words all begin with s, you might have sentences such as: Sally sat silently or Send some soda soon.

Sound-Letter Regularity

Another approach to the introduction of those first words would be to introduce only words which represent sound-letter relationships which do not vary from word to word. For example, one may choose words which contain the letter m as in man or may or mother whereas one would not introduce words which contained the letter c as in city or car or chew. If adopted, then words introduced first would contain--preferably begin with--b, d, f, h, j, k, l, m, n, r, s, t, v, or z (3). You notice that the letters are all consonants; consistancy in sound-letter correspondence

is maintained much more so with consonants than with vowels. Should your first words begin with some of the letters that consistently represent the same sound, then you have more options in deciding which words to introduce. Using this approach first sentences may be like: Ten big girls jumped rope or Mom did not like singing.

Spelling Patterns and Phonograms

Related to the previous approach is the use of spelling patterns. There are several spelling patterns which represent uniformity in a given combination of letters and are always (almost always) pronounced the same regardless of the word in which they are found (4). For example, in the consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) spelling pattern with the an phonogram we have words like fan, man, pan, plan, or span. In the consonant-vowel-consoant-final-silent-e (CVCE) spelling pattern, the words mate, hate, fate, or plate maintain their regularity. In the spelling pattern where we have consonant-vowel-vowel-consonant (CVVC) the regularity is not as great (note grāte), but some of the vowel combinations such as oa in boat, goat, or float are good. And in the consonant vowel (CV) pattern found in several common short words such as he or me, or in many syllables such as ti in tiger we also have consistancy in sound-letter relationship.

If one considers using phonograms and beginning consonants which are regular and forms words like set, wet, pet, lake, take, make, flake, brake, or pain, main, stain, it is possible to generate hundreds of words which do maintain sound-letter regularity. It is then possible to introduce words such as those used in the following sentences: He broke ten big plates or Run home with me.

Word Length

Another approach would be to classify all words on the basis of

length and introduce them in order, one-letter words such as I and a introduced first, two letter words such as he, me, be, by, my, to, is, or, in, on, it or of next, etc. The problem with this approach is that you would have to introduce the fifteen or more one- and two-letter words without any hope of putting these words together to form sentences, since they are nearly all function words. And you encounter another problem when you move to the three-letter words, there are hundreds of them; it would be a problem deciding which from among them should be introduced first. Also, it is incorrect to assume that short words are easier to learn simply because they are short. Our most common short words are words to which no concrete referent may be attached. Common short words such as to, of, is, the, for, and had are actually hard words to learn.

Imagery Level

Another aspect to consider is the imagery level of words and the degree to which this should influence our choice of those beginning words. Most of our content words are words of some imagery level, whereas our function words have little or no imagery. For example the noun, table is a high-imagery word, so is man. Words such as the, and, of, to, which, and where are words to which no object, action, or description may be attached and consequently it is not possible to conjure up a mental image of a the or a which.

The imagery level of words should be a concern, but it cannot be the only concern because it is difficult to construct sentences made up solely of content words since most of our English sentences also contain one or more function words. It is possible, however, to devise sentences constructed of only content words, Mary jumps red wagons and Children

ride orange school buses are two examples.

The approaches discussed thus far have been based on features of our English language. Some approaches that focus more specifically on the child will be considered next.

Articulation

Most children can articulate (pronounce) all the sounds of English by the time they begin grade one. However, some children cannot, and the sounds with which they have the most difficulty are usually those represented in writing by r, l, th, wh, and tl (5). Since some children have trouble with these sounds, it may be reasonable to postpone the introduction of words which contain these letters; words like run, rabbit, Roger, and little, for example, would be delayed. Very few children will have difficulty in articulating the sounds of their language beyond the seventh birthday.

Word Frequency

Another popular approach is to introduce those words on some list which have been identified as common words--words which occur frequently. Such lists are usually derived from some large corpus of words as found in the speech of children or adults (6, 7, 8), the writing of children or adults (9, 10), or literature for children (11, 12) or adults (13). Although many new lists have been compiled in recent years with the aid of computer processing, many teachers still prefer some of the older lists.

Child's Preference

Another approach is to simply ask children--individually or in groups--which words they would like to learn to read first. When this is done, the words selected are likely to be names of 1) animals such as

cat, cow, whales, camels, lion, horse, seal, or pigs, 2) words concerning unusual and/or faraway places such as Japan, jungles, or Mexico, 3) living things other than animals such as bee, trees, flower, robins, octopus, or 4) words related to sports or recreational activities such as ball, baseball, bat, or play (14).

The words chosen by the child will be very high imagery content words--usually nouns--and they will be words of much interest to the child. Sometimes these words are also personal words such as the name of a friend or relative or the name of a street.

Achieving the Necessary Balance

Some of the reasons for selecting certain words are more appropriate than others. Some approaches such as introducing words on the basis of word length may be rejected completely. And other approaches such as introducing words on the basis of the most commonly used letter or the most common beginning letter, may have some merit, but are likely to be rejected also. This leaves six approaches to the introduction of words which remain to be discussed in order of importance.

Probably the best means of establishing some kind of a list of those first words--those first 30 or 40 words--for reading would be to base them on the child's preference and on word frequency. By introducing the child's preferred or personally selected words you maintain a high degree of interest in the reading act and by introducing those very most common words (the, and, a, to, he, in, was, his, it and I) you provide the child with the function words which are necessary in forming standard sentences. The words the child chooses to learn will almost always be words of high imagery. And the high imagery level of the word combined with the fact that the child finds the word interesting makes the word much easier to learn than the function words.

If a child exhibits one of the more common articulation difficulties, it may be wise to delay words which are difficult to pronounce. It may even be well to delay words which contain the difficult sounds until the child can pronounce them. However, difficulty in pronunciation need not be a deterrent to learning to read.

Should the teacher want to continue the teaching of reading by using the child's language exclusively, then the language experience approach may be employed. For those who prefer to use published programs, their selection of the program will probably be based on other considerations which follow.

While the child's preferred words and common function words provide a basis for selecting the very beginning vocabulary, it is reasonable to consider additional words on the basis of letter-sound regularity and spelling patterns; such words may well make use of common phonograms. It is possible to introduce words which are consistant in their letter-sound relationships, common words in the child's vocabulary, and are also words of high imagery. In other words, the approaches to the introduction of words presented here are not mutually exclusive. It is entirely possible to identify and introduce to the beginning reader words which (1) maintain sound letter correspondence, (2) employ more common spelling pattern, (3) have a high imagery level, (4) are easily pronounced by the child, (5) are common in terms of frequency and are, (6) among the child's preferred words. It is this writer's belief that the first words should be selected with that kind of balance in mind.

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